



*A Heritage Sunday Sermon*

*The Power of Through* (Galatians 5: 22-23, Luke 24:13-35)

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# THE POWER OF

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## THROUGH IT ALL...

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# THROUGH

If you had to tell the Christian story in a single word, what would the word be? Love. Grace. Hope. Joy. Peace. Jesus. Resurrection. Redemption.

Here is a word I suspect you did NOT think of: *through*.

*Through?* What kind of word is that? It's not a verb or a noun. It can't be a subject, predicate or even a direct object.

Think of it: the story of Judeo-Christian faith is a *through* story. John Newton, the reformed slave trader turned Anglican priest, taught us to sing the story in words we have come to know by heart: "*Through* many dangers, toils and snares, we have already come...."

Recall the biblical stories that shape our faith: God swept over, under, around and *through* dark, chaotic primordial waters and brought forth light and life. The creation, its peoples and empires fall so far from grace that the Creator considers termination until a certain family—the Noahs—who along with their two-by-two menagerie and *through* a cataclysmic flood save the world. Hopeless slaves in Egypt are led *through* impassable waters of deep trouble to a Promised Land. Jesus is born *through* the waters of a womb and grows up to proclaim that NOW is God's time. *Through* his horrible crucifixion and tomb-bursting resurrection, the world of God's imagining he teaches

and preaches cannot be killed. Christ is risen! Where will disciples find him? In and *through* broken bread and a shared cup they find real presence and new recognition. "... He is going ahead of you..." the gospels say, indicating there's stuff to pass *through* to keep up with him and get to where he's leading.

We Methodists love our history. *Through* the Wesleys' failed mission in Georgia, God stirred up a heart-strangely-warmed, new movement of practical divinity. *Through* the revival they ignited the cold, unenthused religious form that passed for "church" in their day by the energy of "love divine all loves excelling." *Through* theological and ecclesiastical disagreements the Wesleys' movement grew to be a church that has lived *through* differing perspective about the role of laity and bishops, *through* the "vilest" human institution of chattel slavery, *through* North and South divided, *through* planned separation and unsettling U.S. Supreme Court settlement, *through* fears birth control would ruin family values, *through* a jurisdictional system of governance created to keep Blacks in their place, *through* wrangling over the ordination of women and sustaining stained glass ceilings to keep them in their place, *through* "open hearts, open minds, open doors" and just how "open" when it comes to including LGBTQ sisters and brothers, *through* "open pulpits," more open to some than to others, *through* the new, ever-widening complex, complicating relationships of living into a global United Methodist Church, *through* many a compromise that in hindsight makes us scratch our heads and wonder how we survived but in God's time may have been the Holy Spirit's only avenue to stick with us to where we find ourselves today.

*Through it all.*

The United Methodist Church has come *through* a lot. How's this for our original rallying song: "And are we yet alive to see each other's face?"

*What troubles have we seen  
What mighty conflicts past  
Fighting since without and fears within  
Since we assembled last.*

*Yet (another word for "through") out of all, the Lord  
Hath brought us by his love  
And still he doth his help afford  
And hide our life above. (And Are We Yet Alive, UM Hymnal, No. 553, vs. 3 & 4)*

Someone else who knows church history taught us to sing the song another way:

*“Through it all, through it all,  
I’ve learned to trust in Jesus....”* (Through It All, *UM Hymnal*, No. 507)

*Through* it all, we have made great strides. History helps us with a longer view. In my youth I witnessed the historic 1968 merger when Methodists and Evangelical United Brethren, traditions ministering side-by-side in spirit and discipline since colonial times, joined into one body. At the same time, the newly forming United Methodist Church reunited Black Methodists to a new, different, desegregated denominational life and system. The dismantling of the Central Jurisdiction that divided Methodists along racial lines (1939-1968) was and is an indication of a painful, conflicted racial history. It also brought an intentional commitment to work *through* what must happen in order to become a wholly open, inclusive church by forming a standing Commission on Religion and Race.

The denomination’s ethnic and minority constituencies wrote their documents to help the whole church flourish *through* efforts to be in a healed, right relationship with each of them. Six ethnic/language ministry plans have been adopted: The Native American Comprehensive Plan (1968); the National Plan for Hispanic/Latino Ministry (1992); The Korean Ministry Plan (1996); Strengthening the Black Church for the 21st Century (1996); and the Asian American Language Ministry (1996). More outreach plans are needed, like recent initiatives targeting young people and young adult clergy (2012). And there’s still more to get *through*.

*Through* Africa University, founded in 1996, today more than 6,000 graduates have been sharing their gifts and making connections throughout the continent in difference-making, life-sustaining, and peace-building ways in agriculture, technology, government and pastoral ministries. *Through* Acts of Repentance, the Church confessed, addressed and continues the ongoing work of healing broken relationships with African Americans, Native Americans and other indigenous peoples, facing with openness and integrity its past racist history which still impacts the present day.

Journeying *through* deference to dignity, women in the church have slowly made gains. After attaining full clergy rights in 1956, it was not until 1976 that women clergy were elected to General Conference as delegates. Four years later, Marjorie Swank Matthews became the first woman to be elected bishop. Another new and standing Commission on the Status and Role of Women was authorized (1972) and continues to insure the full and equal participation of women the UMC.

*Through* divestments, Methodists had a hand in the fall of South Africa’s apartheid government. *Through* boycotts against Nestle, Shell Oil, and Taco Bell, we have been

partners to needed global social change. *Through* the Shalom Zone initiative, we birthed zones of community transformation in cities and towns in the deep distresses of police brutality and poverty. Imagining NO Malaria has all but wiped out the disease. *Through* the work of UMCOR, disasters around the world—close to home for some in our connection—many are offered life-saving and new-life giving support.

This history reminds us how the experience of and work for change is slow. Finding a way *through* social and structural changes is time-consuming, tedious and fraught with challenges—especially in the moment. But history's long view—and the power of *through* it reveals—reminds us that inspired, determined vision, and our efforts to bring such vision to reality, will not be in vain.

Despite this long-view perspective, many contemporary United Methodists asked to describe the denomination will likely use words like *stuck* or *divided*. I want to introduce these people to the power of *through* because the sweep of history shows the Spirit moving *through* whatsoever and whosoever; moving *through* old brokenness to new lands of hope and promise. We have been the discouraged, heartbroken disciples meeting Jesus on the road—sharing our heart's overwhelming despair with him. But then—like a bitterly-mourned, lost hope that is now miraculously found—a risen Jesus breaks bread with them and resurrection is recognized (Luke 24:13-35).

The story of the Judeo-Christian faith is about God busy in the world, *not* saving the world *from* dangers, toils, and snares but redeeming, even sanctifying the world *through* them.

What does the power of *through* bring to the challenges of keeping the faith every day? How about some grace and courage with one another until we catch up with Jesus who—as the Easter gospel says—is out ahead of us. *Through-it-all* faith is a call to stick together with hope and trust. The journey is all about hanging-in, hanging-on, and hanging-together because the suffering, stresses, strains, hurts and challenges in the world where we are called to minister may get the best of us without mutual support.

Wasn't this the key purpose the class and band meetings in our denominational beginnings were meant to achieve? Our leaders recognized the world could be too dangerous a place for anyone to go it alone. How might we rediscover and implement this power?

Just so this doesn't sound like call to passive acceptance of whatever-will-be-will-be, here are denominational DNA markers ("*through ways*") from our history and its ethos:

United Methodists are

- *people whose relationship with God is grounded in a theology of love extended to ALL people.* The distinctive text of our tradition, our hymnody reverberates with God's jaw-dropping, amazing, boundary-breaking, perfecting love. From "Love divine all loves excelling" to "Lost in wonder, love and praise," from "O Love Divine what hast thou Done" to "And Can it be that I should Gain," God preveniently seeks to engage humanity—everyone! (Mercy sakes! Back in the day, we even welcomed Presbyterians! LOL). Faith in God's love for ALL will see us *through!*

- *people who experience God's love in Jesus Christ and are transformed.* This part of the United Methodist paradigm comes to mind when I remember an experience with the Lay Leader in my home church. The congregation saw him as the model Christian. One day he surprised everyone when describing his new experience by way of a Lay Witness Mission. Faith, he said, had moved from his head, where it had comfortably resided for years, to his heart, where he felt a fervor he hadn't known before. This head-to-heart moved to his hands and feet in new ways and as a result he led the church and himself to greater community involvement. How Methodist of him! Lives transformed because they have experienced God's love in Jesus Christ experienced by people will see us *through!*

- *people propelled to put God's love into action.* They become difference-makers. Grounded-in and experiencing the God of love and inclusion in Jesus Christ, lives are transformed. United Methodists can't sit still. This is the Wesleyan dynamic duo—personal piety and social holiness are an inseparable connection. The Christian journey is a journey inward and a journey outward. God's love in action seen and experienced propelled by our life in Jesus Christ will see us *through.*

The life and vibrancy of the Holy Spirit, so central to the experience of United Methodists throughout history is the energy in the power of *through*. The Spirit comes to fruition in our "affection, exuberance about life, serenity, a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, a basic conviction that basic holiness permeates things and people, loyal in commitments, not needing to force our own way" (Galatians 5:22-23, *The Message*).

Heritage Sunday 2020 was to focus on highly anticipated divisions to our beloved Church post General Conference 2020 in Minneapolis, giving consideration to what our history might offer to “just such a time as this.” The COVID-19 pandemic may have changed the special Sunday’s context but not how the denomination’s legacy will inspire, support and serve the Church in a different, now pandemic-driven “new normal” we did not expect.

The same power of *through*, the same we’ve-come-this-far-by-faith, long-view superimposed onto the present bears witness to what Methodists have endured and kindles the confidence that we will make it *through* again. *And Are We Yet Alive* is not only a song we sing, it is an affirmation of the life we live, the faith we keep and the way we do “church.” It is the hope we bear—the reason for the connections we keep—to make it *through*.

At a Passover Seder, as the guest of Jewish friends, we prayed this prayer that ends the meal and sends the faithful forth. Its words have stayed with me:

Standing on the parted shores of history, we still believe what we were taught before we ever stood at Sinai’s foot: that wherever we go it is eternally Egypt, that there is a better place, a promised land; that winding our way to that promise passes through wilderness AND that there is no way to get from here to there except by joining hands, marching TOGETHER.<sup>1</sup> (Emphasis mine.)

United Methodists have a word for the through-it-all impact of such togetherness—“connection.” Has there ever been a time when a Christ-centered, mission-focused connectional church is more urgently needed? What is our history if not a witness to prayerful piety and social engagement connecting people to the hopeful good news of Jesus Christ, connecting socially-distanced members and quarantined communities to resources for prayer and worship, connecting globally, conveying crucial information, learning resources and experienced practical leadership, connecting resources and directing them to the most vulnerable and those in need of advocacy. The power of *through* comes to life in our connecting.

The God of history and the Lord of *through-it-all* has abided with us—our churches and conferences—*through* hurricanes, foods, earthquakes, fires and past pandemics, through denominational break-ups over racism, theology, and forms of governance. We forget how our history has not been marked by times of breaking-apart but in how we come-together in deepening union and reunion.

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<sup>1</sup> Haggadah. Michael Walzer in *Mishkan T’filah: A Reform Seder*, CCAR, 2009.

God open our eyes to your *through-it-all* faithfulness and our energies to the power of through so that we can truly sing in harmony:

*Yet out of all, the Lord  
Hath brought us by his love  
And still he doth his help afford  
And hide our life above.*